



Set priorities for such work as repairing utility equipment, so it will be fully ready for all spring chores. Photos courtesy: Trusty & Associates.

# Preparing Ball Diamonds For Spring

*Compiled from information supplied by sports turf managers Mike Trigg, Mike Hurd, Mike Matherne, Jesse Cuevas, Mike Andresen, Chris Bunnell and Steve Wightman.*

**B**efore the first softball or baseball player takes the field, sports turf managers must complete a packed agenda of preparations. While coaches and players obviously want to begin practice as soon as weather permits, getting the field into safe, playable condition must be the first priority.

To make the job easier — and avoid potential liability — develop a pre-season checklist. List all areas that must be addressed, note work done, when, and by whom, problems identified and actions taken to rectify those problems. When multiple fields are involved, crews equipped with such checklists can handle routine maintenance procedures and alert supervisory personnel to problems that need further attention.

## Structures

Take advantage of decent early spring weather to inspect and repair any structures that are involved in the softball or baseball program. The sports turf manager may be responsible for upkeep of bleachers or stands, dugouts, restrooms, concession stands, press boxes and player's locker rooms.

Set priorities for such indoor work as painting, wall or floor repair, updates or repairs on utility service areas and equipment, and remodeling. Fit these tasks into the schedule on days when outdoor work is impractical.

Prepare a detailed, item-by-item checklist for each structure. For example, the bleacher checklist could include: structural integrity, entrance and exit ramps or stairs, floors and walkways, railings, seating, signage, lighting, water, other service connections, perimeters and overall appearance.

## Parking Areas

On paved parking areas, check for uneven spots as well as actual damage during the pre-season cleanup. Schedule any needed repairs or repainting of lines and special access areas. On rock or graveled parking areas, grade to correct high and low spots and bring in additional materials as necessary.

Inspect medians and barriers, and parking area perimeters, including curbing, gates, and entry or exit walkways.

## Fencing

Combine cleanup and inspection of fences, instructing crews to perform a section-by-section security and safety check.

On chainlink fences, make sure posts are "seated" properly and solidly and positioned accurately. Check all fence connection points. Find and fix any loose, protruding, bent or missing wire. Inspect fence tops, including any added security or safety features.

On wooden fences, check for structural integrity and solid installation. Find and fix any rough, cracked, broken or missing boards. Schedule painting or application of preservative materials if necessary.

## Lighting

Outdoor lighting systems for sports fields should be designed and installed by lighting professionals familiar with all applicable electrical codes and equipment options, and with practical knowledge and experience in outdoor lighting. These professionals will help establish a maintenance program for crews to follow.

Pre-season and routine maintenance should cover all of the lighting system components for the lighted field — electrical, fixtures and structural. Regular diagnostic tests also should be scheduled to identify problems that are not easily discerned by visual inspection. Secure the services of a qualified electrician for testing and repairs.

## Irrigation System

Temperatures will dictate when irrigation systems can be activated for the season. Follow precisely the instructions for your own below or above ground system. For in-ground systems, check heads for correct "seating" after the freeze-thaw cycles of winter and off-season field activity. Once systems are operational, check water "throw" patterns for even distribution. Make repairs and corrections before the playing season begins.

Once systems are activated in colder climates, provisions must be made to protect sensitive components from damaging late spring freezes. Even a hair-line crack can destroy a unit.

**The Field**

Ideally, many field preparations, such as "lip" removal, will have been completed in the fall. If weather and scheduling haven't made that possible, extra time must be allocated in early spring.

Remove any "lip" — that section where infield material builds up in the turf along the infield and outfield edges of the skinned basepaths. With regular daily attention in-season, lip buildup can be minimal. For minor lip buildup, cut a trench at the edge of the grass line. Then roll the area and tamp down the turf. For greater lip buildup, use a sod cutter to remove a strip of turf along these edges, along with approximately four inches of the underlying soil mix. Remove any remaining excess material and reset the existing sod, or replace it with new sod. Remeasure proper field dimensions and edge the turf.

The skinned material of baseball fields varies in composition depending on individual preferences and the availability of funds. Frequently this mix contains clay, sand and specialized commercial infield mix, in varying percentages.

Prepare new infield material in the same proportions as the existing skinned area material. The new material will need to be moist, but not overly wet. It should be wet enough to "bond" with the existing material, dry enough to keep from sticking to equipment, but not so dry that it continually needs rewetting.

The skinned area needs to be firm to support player activity, but not too hard. It must have a consistency so that, during play, it can be kept moist enough to inhibit dust, but not so moist the players have problems making the twists, turns, starts and stops that are so much a part of the game.

There should be no difference in the level between the turf soil surface and the skinned area, or of the "feel" of the area as the player moves from the turf to the skinned surface and back again. Also, level skinned areas give the ball a "true" bounce, whether it hits a turfed or skinned spot.

Use a scarifying drag that penetrates one to three inches into the skinned area to break up the surface and loosen any areas of compaction. Add new material as necessary. Use a leveling drag to move material from high points to low points, and to create a level surface. Roll or tamp the area to create a solid base. Continue adding new material, "spiking" or scarifying, rolling or tamping, until the desired level is reached. Keep leveling drags eight to 12 inches from the edge of the turf to avoid creating a lip. Use rakes and tamps to level the areas next to the turf. If desired, work a higher percentage of commercial infield mix into the top quarter inch of the skinned area. Use a rake or broom to remove any infield mix from the turf edges. "Finish" the area with a mat drag.

Inspect the heavily used homeplate area. The top of homeplate should be flat and level with the surrounding soil, with the edges buried, even when a plate with beveled edges is used.

Measure for correct base placement. Check existing base anchors. If installing new base anchors, follow instructions precisely. Anchor pegs must be cleaned out to ensure that the base fits securely. When properly seated, all four sides of the base will touch the "dirt."



**During the spring, begin regular in-season maintenance procedures, including painting or chalking lines, prior to the first practice or game.**

Measure the precise pitching mound location and dimensions according to the level of play which will take place on the field. Rework the mound, making repairs as necessary. The pitching rubber should be flush with the "dirt" surrounding it. The area in front of the rubber and the area where the pitcher "lands" following a pitch generally need the most attention. Pack materials well to ensure a firm, smooth surface.

Prepare the bullpen mounds to the same specifications and standards as the pitching mound.

Inspect the turf in the infield and outfield and in surrounding areas used by the general public. Remove any debris. Repair spots damaged by heavy snows, standing ice or water, equipment traffic or winter use. Level and repair any low or high areas.

Take soil samples for testing. Pull turf plugs from several segments of the field. Check the plugs for root development, crown health and any signs of soil problems. Schedule changes in cultural practices if necessary.

Begin the regular turf maintenance program. This may include mowing, aeration, overseeding, fertilization and topdressing.

Make sure equipment is in good condition and operating properly. Check supply levels. Order materials as required to meet coming needs.

Review procedures with experienced personnel. Use hands-on demonstrations to train new personnel.

Begin regular in-season maintenance procedures, including painting or chalking lines, prior to the first practice or game. □



**A playable, attractive and safe field has its roots in a pre-season checklist, allowing the sports turf manager to complete all necessary tasks well before players take to the field.**